

## **CONTRIBUTION ON NATIONALISM, PART 1**

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The present debate, initiated in written form with the publication of the resolution *Canada and the Crisis of World Imperialism*, (DB 17, November 1972) is the most crucial and serious one that the Canadian section has faced for a long period of time. The outcome of this debate will directly determine our section's ability to understand the politics of Canada and to gain a hearing for our ideas, the Marxist conceptions and program. The resolution of the debate will also have no small bearing on our ability to identify the main trends of international developments and appreciate the international strategy of revolutionary socialists, Trotskyists.

The debate is centered around what we, the opponents of the resolution *Canada and the Crisis of World Imperialism*, consider to be the rise of a new Canadian nationalism which in its essential thrust is not to be dismissed as bourgeois, but is radical and anti-capitalist. It is essential that our movement identify this sentiment correctly in order to intervene effectively in Canadian politics with our ideas. That document would have us dump the central thesis projected in our 1968 position on Canada-US Relations (*see text at W2-1968--ed.*) which enables us to intervene and, if adopted, would completely cut us off by imposing upon us the task of conducting an anti-nationalist campaign.

Given the seriousness of the debate we consider that an elucidation of the traditional Marxist approach to the national question is essential. This includes the concrete accomplishments of Marxism with respect to specific problems and the method employed to address new problems. This task is of particular importance since the charge of revising Marxism's basic concepts with respect to this issue has been thrown in our face, even before the discussion began in a written form, before our views were really known. We intend to show that our position is completely within the tradition of Marxism-Leninism and indeed enriches the Marxist appreciation of the problem.

Nationalism is one of the most complex and contradictory elements in modern history. For this reason Marxists have had considerable difficulty assessing its essential features. In addition, precisely because of its complexity, it has been difficult for us, with our many heritages from bourgeois society, among them a tendency towards dogmatism, to understand it. The desire for ready-made schematic answers to the question when it arises has caused considerable confusion. As a result the Trotskyist movement on a world scale particularly in Canada, not to mention the broader spectrum of people who identify themselves as Marxists, stands in a state of considerable unclarity and confusion. In an attempt to erase much of this confusion, to clear up where Marxism has stood and stands today, we feel that an appraisal of the Marxist approach to the national question as it has been developed through history is essential before an evaluation and discussion of the question of Canadian nationalism can be seriously undertaken. The first section of this document is devoted to this purpose.

### **What is nationalism?**

Before an appraisal of the Marxist attitude with regard to the national question, it is useful to appreciate the general features of nationalism as they have arisen within the framework of the historical process. This is particularly useful from the viewpoint of studying Canadian nationalism.

Unfortunately our research has not uncovered any comprehensive study of the question from a Marxist standpoint. The best reference source we have come across is one entitled *The Idea of Nationalism* by Hans Kohn, an academic.

This book admirably captures much of the essential features of nationalism. Many of Hans Kohn's observations on the national question bring together what various Marxists have said in various places, most often in the heat of polemics. No Marxist we know of has tied these strands of thought into one comprehensive work. We will therefore refer to *The Idea of Nationalism* in order to introduce the subject of nationalism.

At its birth, nationalism was revolutionary through and through. Inspired by nationalist aspirations the masses were propelled toward the overthrow of feudalism and the establishment of nation states in which capitalism could flourish. Nationalism was a product of living history conditioned by the growth of capitalist productive relations and a new revolutionary class, the capitalist class:

"...nationalism" according to Kohn, "is not a natural phenomenon, not a product of 'eternal' or 'natural' laws; it is a product of the growth of social and intellectual factors at a certain stage of history. Some feeling of nationality, it may be said, existed before the birth of modern nationalism -- a feeling varying in strength and in frequency from time to time: at some epochs almost completely extinguished, at others more or less clearly discernible. But it was largely unconscious and inarticulate. It did not influence the thought and actions of men in a deep and all pervading way. It found a clear expression only occasionally in individuals, and in groups only at times of stress or provocation. It did not determine their aims or actions permanently or in the long run. It was (*has?*) no purposeful will or welding together (*of*) all the individuals in a unity of emotions, thoughts, and actions."

Nationalism has arisen relatively recently in human history and in its rise took on features corresponding to its age: "Nationalism," says Kohn, "is not older than the second half of the eighteenth century. Its first great manifestation was the French revolution, which gave the new movement an increased dynamic force... Nationalism is inconceivable without the ideas of popular sovereignty preceding -- without a complete revision of the position of ruler and ruled, of classes and castes." (*Web Ed. note: another great event with strong patriotic motivation and preceding it was that which Marxists have called "the First American Revolution" -- the war of independence from the English. Kick-started by the Declaration of Independence, it saw the British overlords in the Thirteen Colonies deprived of their power and privileges and exiled, with many going to Canada (the United Empire Loyalists). The example that this American revolution provided helped bring on the French Revolution.*)

Kohn then capsulizes its main routes: "The aspect of the universe and society had to be secularized with the help of a new natural science and of natural law as understood by Grotius and Locke. The traditionalism of economic life had to be broken by the rise of the third estate, which was to turn the attention away from the royal courts and their civilization to the life, language, and arts of the people. This new class found itself less bound by tradition than by the nobility or Clergy; it represented a new force striving for new things; it was ready to break with the past, flouting tradition in its opinion, even more than it did in reality. In its rise, it claimed to represent not only a new class and its interests, but the whole of people."

Nationalism, although it is based in and springs from objective conditions, is essentially a sentiment, an idea, a product of human consciousness:

"Although some of these objective factors (language, common customs and traditions, common territory, nation state--DL) are of great importance for the formation of nationalities, the most essential element is a living and active corporate will. A French nation, the population of the French kingdom, existed before, as did some of the objective conditions necessary for the foundation of a nationality. But only the newly aroused consciousness and will made these

elements active and effective, fused them into a source of immense centripetal power, and gave them a new importance and meaning."

Kohn identifies the striving of nationalities toward a nation state: "The growth of nationalism is the process of integration of the masses of the people into a common political form. Nationalism therefore presupposes the existence, in fact or as an ideal, of a centralized form of government over a large and distinct territory."

Nationalism by its nature is complicated, contradictory, fluid, changing with history: "Nationalities are the product of the historical development of society. They are not identical with clans, tribes, or folk-groups -- bodies of men united by actual or supposed common descent or by a common habitat. Ethnographic groups like these existed throughout history, from earliest times on, yet they do not form nationalities; they are nothing but 'ethnographic material', out of which under certain circumstances a nationality might arise."

"Even if a nationality arises, it may disappear again, absorbed into a larger or new nationality. Nationalities are products of the living forces of history, and therefore always fluctuating, never rigid. Nationalities are groups of very recent origin and therefore are of the utmost complexity. They defy exact definition. Nationality is an historical and a political concept, and the words 'nation' and 'nationality' have undergone many changes in meaning. It is only in recent history that man has begun to regard nationality as the center of his political and cultural activity and life. Nationality is therefore nothing absolute, and it is a great mistake, responsible for most of the extremities of today, to make it an absolute, an objective **a priori**, the source of all political and cultural life."

With that background, which we think useful to dialectical materialists, although Kohn's work has strong philosophical idealist characteristics, we will proceed to the clearly defined Marxist tradition.

### **Marx and Engels on Nationalism**

Marx and Engels, born and living in the era of the rise and formation of great nation states, in the era of the dramatic rise and consolidation of capitalism on a world scale, viewed the formation of the nation state as a fundamentally progressive and necessary step. Economically it laid the basis for socialism. Politically it prepared the ground for the last of all class struggles, between the working class and the capitalist class. It was a prerequisite for any international cooperation of the proletariat.

Along this vein Engels wrote, "It is historically impossible for a large people to discuss seriously any international questions as long as its national independence is lacking. An international movement of the proletariat," he continued, "is in general only possible between independent nations... To get rid of national oppression is the basic condition of a healthy and free development..."

Engels hailed the consolidation of the United States, after the civil war and predicted that the United States would consequently play a key and crucial role in world politics.

Both Marx and Engels were particularly concerned about the belated development of the German nation state. In 1884 Engels wrote, "Both the Prussianization of Germany and the perpetuation of the small state confusion were against the interests of the proletariat. These interests", he continued, "called for uniting Germany at last into a nation, which alone could set up, free from all small-spirited survivals, the last (tilting ground —DL) in which the bourgeoisie and the proletariat could try their strength."

On the other hand Marx and Engels has little initial sympathy for the growing disparity of the subjugated and oppressed nationalities which paralleled the rise of the larger nation states. These founders of scientific socialism generally held the view that capitalism and the nation state was the prerequisite for further development. Advancing capitalism would draw in and lift all the historically backward nations and propel their development into the modern age. The areas of the world that were not reached by capitalism would benefit directly from the transformation of the nation-state through the process of socialist revolutions.

So paramount was this conception in their minds that in their early years they discounted, seemed to even scorn, the legitimate, national aspirations of oppressed nations. Some of their comments would almost appear to border on chauvinism and bigotry.

In 1852. Engels wrote for the *New York Tribune*: "The history of a thousand years ought to have shown the dying nationalities of the Bohemians, Carpathians, Dalmatians, etc., that if all the territory east of the Elbe and Saale had at one time been occupied by kindred Slavonians, this fact merely proved the historical tendency and the **physical and intellectual power of the German nation** to subdue and assimilate its ancient neighbors..."

During the Opium Wars, Marx made what might be considered slighting comments about the Chinese. "It would seem as though history," he wrote, "had first to make this whole people drunk before it could rouse them out of their hereditary stupidity."

They justified their support for the U.S. conquest of California. To their thinking at that time, the "energetic Yankees" would develop California better and faster than the "lazy Mexicans."

Later in their lives Marx and Engels began to view the oppression of small nations in a different light. Engels had growing sympathies for the Algerian struggle against the French. It was the Irish national question, however, which started them moving decisively away from their former quite one-sided position. Marx concluded that the English working class could not be free while it continued to support the oppression of the Irish. The English working class had to side with Ireland before the English bourgeoisie could be toppled. They hailed the Irish national struggle. Engels enthusiastically set to work to write a history of the Irish people. The founders of scientific socialism laid the basis for future revolutionaries with their later attitude toward and appreciation of the Irish national struggle.

Marx and Engels also noted with concern the growing tendency of the workers, especially skilled workers, of the advanced capitalist countries to identify their interest with the interests of the bourgeoisie and the state. Marx surmised that the working class was benefiting directly from the exploitation of the colonies.

Engels consistently warned against siding with the imperialists of the advanced capitalist countries. He viewed with horror the prospect of an inter-imperialist war. "I should consider a European war to be a misfortune," he wrote in 1882. "This time it would be terribly serious; it would set chauvinism going everywhere for years, because every nation would be fighting for its own existence. All the work of the revolutionaries in Russia who are now nearing success would be rendered useless -- would be destroyed; our party in Germany would be temporarily swamped and ruined by the flood of chauvinism, and it would be the same in France."

Marx and Engels left some major accomplishments in the development of scientific socialism for future generations with respect to the national question. They recognized the positive historically necessary rise of capitalism and the nation state. They were steadfast advocates of proletarian internationalism to their death. They gradually developed a growing

appreciation of oppressed nationalities throughout their lives. The position on Ireland was a concrete step forward, which future Marxists would utilize.

They did not, however, develop a rounded analysis of the conflicting and contradictory elements of nationalism. They did not call for the self determination of all nations. Although they warned against supporting imperialist policies later in their lives, living in the confines of their age they failed to realize how utterly and completely the workers would succumb to national chauvinism, especially the workers in the German Social Democratic Party. These problems were left to the great Marxists of the twentieth century to solve in the fire of war and revolution.

### **Lenin on the National Question**

Lenin, in working out a revolutionary strategy for the oppressed nationalities surrounding Russia, is credited with developing the Marxist approach to oppressed nations.

Basing himself to a large degree on Marx and Engels' position on Ireland, Lenin argued that revolutionaries had to support the right of all nations to self determination, the right to secession and independent existence for each nationality within the state. Lenin recognized the unevenness in historical development. He saw that although imperialism is the dominant system on a world scale, various historical epochs prevailed in different countries. In particular, democratic struggles and aspirations, including national consciousness and struggles, characterized the social and political life of many oppressed nations.

Lenin's thinking was based on profound concepts of internationalism and proletarian solidarity. The working class of the oppressor nation had to be won to the cause of the oppressed nation. This opened up the possibility for a united struggle against the state. At the same time Lenin insisted on the necessity for a multi-national democratic centralized revolutionary party within the nation state. The correctness of his overall policy was proved by history with the victory of the revolutionary forces in Russia in 1917.

His analysis in this respect had world wide applicability. In *(his essay)* "Independence and the Ukraine and Sectarian Muddleheads" (*Writings of Leon Trotsky (1939-40)*), Trotsky recalls how "Lenin often used to cite the fact that the relations between the Norwegian and Swedish workers improved and became closer after the disruption of the compulsory unification of Sweden and Norway."

While Lenin fought the reactionary bourgeois nationalism of the imperialist expansionist powers, he had no use for an abstract and general evaluation of nationalism applicable for all time. He insisted on a concrete and specific analysis.

**In *(his essay)* "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomization", he said, "In my writings on the national question I have already said that an abstract presentation of the question of nationalism in general is of no use at all. A distinction must necessarily be made," he continued, "between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation, the nationalism of a big nation and that of a small nation." (Paragraph emphasis by the website editor)**

He was equally emphatic in other places. In *(another essay)* "The Right of Nations to Self Determination" he wrote, "The categorical requirement of Marxist theory in investigating any social question is that it be examined within **definite** historical limits, and, if it refers to a particular country (e.g., the national program for a given country), that account be taken of the specific features distinguishing that country from others in the same historical epoch."

**He was not in favor of all expressions of nationalism in an oppressed or small nation or country in principle. It all depended on the concrete and specific situation. In *(his essay)* "The Question of Nationalities or 'Autonomization," he wrote, "The fundamental interest of proletarian solidarity, and consequently of the proletarian class struggle, requires that we never adopt a formal attitude to the national question, but always take into account the specific attitude of the proletarian of the oppressed (or small) nation towards the oppressor (or great) nation." *(Paragraph emphasis by the website editor)***

Lenin was also careful to distinguish between the nationalism of the ruling class, within the oppressor or large nation who strive for special privileges for the nation and their class, and the nationalism of the workers. Lenin identified with the progressive aspects of national consciousness in the workers. " 'No nation can be free if it oppresses other nations,' said Marx and Engels, the greatest representatives of consistent nineteenth century democracy, who became the teachers of the revolutionary proletariat. And, full of a sense of national pride, we Great-Russian workers want, come what may, a free and independent, a democratic, republic and proud Great Russia." Lenin went so far as to label Plekhanov and other-Great-Russian socialist-chauvinists, "traitors" to Great-Russia.

**Lenin and the revolutionaries of his time had to grapple with one of the most complex and difficult problems of the twentieth century, the question of nationalism. Lenin, aided by a few threads on the issue bequeathed by Marx and Engels, developed a profound appreciation of the conflicting and contradictory aspects of nationalism in oppressed and small nations as well as large and oppressor nations. He rejected any formal, schematic approach to all situations where the question arises -- "we never adopt a formal attitude to the national question". *(Paragraph emphasis by the website editor)***

The attitude of the workers was central to his analysis -- "always take into account the specific attitude of the proletarian of the oppressed (or small) nation towards the oppressor (or great) nation." In the interests of internationalism, he sided with all expressions of nationalism which oppose oppression, chauvinism, exploitation, domination, etc. In the case of oppressed nations he called upon revolutionaries to fight for their right to self determination, to secession.

### **Trotsky On The National Question**

Trotsky was essentially a continuator of Lenin's teachings with respect to the national question.

He too laid decisive stress on the thinking of the masses. In *Independence of the Ukraine and Sectarian Muddleheads* Trotsky formulates the crucial question that must be asked. "Have Stalin and his Ukrainian satraps succeeded in convincing the Ukrainian masses of the superiority of Moscow's centralism over the Ukrainian independence, or have they failed?" he poses. "This question," he continues, "is of decisive importance."

In the same article he wrote, "The great masses of the Ukrainian people are dissatisfied with their national fate and wish to change it drastically. It is this fact," he said, "that the revolutionary politician must, in contrast to the bureaucrat and the sectarian, take as his point of departure."

Trotsky also deepened our understanding of the national question by applying to it the concepts worked out in his theory of permanent revolution. He codified this contribution as one of the basic postulates of the theory of permanent revolution. "With regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries," he wrote, "the theory of the permanent revolution signifies that the complete and genuine solution of their

tasks of achieving **democracy and national emancipation** is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses."

Trotsky did not withhold his support from legitimate national aspirations because petit-bourgeois elements were first to support it. He considered this natural. In the (*his essay*) "Negro Question in America," discussions with Swabeck, Feb. 28, 1933, (contained in *Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination*) he argues, "It is clear that the special Negro elements who appear more in the public eye (businessmen, intellectuals, lawyers, etc.) are more active and react more actively against inequality." "The petty-bourgeoisie will take up the demand for 'social, political and economic equality' and for 'self-determination'" he continues later in the discussion, "but prove absolutely incapable in the struggle; the Negro proletariat will march over the petty bourgeoisie in the direction toward the proletarian revolution. That is perhaps for them the most important road. I can therefore see no reason why we should not advance the demand for 'self-determination'..."

Trotsky firmly embedded Lenin's approach to the national question in the Transitional Program (*published as a pamphlet -- see W20 --Web ed.*) and its underlying method of approach. In "Independence of the Ukraine and Sectarian Muddleheads," he succinctly expresses his way of thinking as opposed to a sectarian's approach which rejected the slogan of self-determination for the Ukrainian people. "To find the bridge from reaction to revolution -- that is the task."

**"This is the import, by the way," he explains, "of our entire program of transitional demands in *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the tasks of the Fourth International*.\*(see footnote). Small wonder that the sectarians of all shadings fail to understand its meaning" he continues. "They operate by means of abstractions -- an abstraction of imperialism and an abstraction of the socialist revolution. The question of the transition from real imperialism to real revolution; the question of how to mobilize the masses in the given historical situation for the conquest of power remains for these sterile wiseacres a book sealed with seven seals." (Paragraph emphasis by the website editor)**

Like Lenin, Trotsky did not reject the nationalism of workers in imperialist oppressor nations. For him, revolutionaries had to separate out reactionary support for predatory imperialist policies from a legitimate concern about their personal fate. Thus he codified this important concept in the "Transitional Program": "The capitalist and his journalist understand by the defense of the fatherland the seizure of colonies and markets, the predatory increase of the 'national' share of world income," he points out. "Bourgeois pacifism and patriotism are shot through, with deceit." "In the pacifism and even patriotism of the oppressed," he continues on the next line, "there are elements which reflect on the one hand a hatred of destructive war, and on the other a clinging **to what they believe to be their own good -- elements which we must know how to seize upon in order to draw the requisite conclusions.**" (my emphasis -- D.L.)

Furthermore, Trotsky did not exclude the workers of an imperialist nation actively carrying out a struggle against foreign capitalists to defend their country. In analysing the slogan "Defense of the Fatherland", used by imperialists to justify foreign plunder, Trotsky in the "Transitional Program" explains: "Defense of the Fatherland"? -- But by this abstraction the bourgeoisie understands the defense of its profits and plunder." "We," he continues in the next sentence, **"stand ready to defend the fatherland from foreign capitalists,** if we first bind our own (capitalists) hand and foot and hinder them from attacking foreign fatherlands; if the workers and the farmers of our country become its real masters; if the wealth of the country be transferred from the hands of a tiny minority to the hands of the people; if the army becomes a weapon of the exploited instead of the exploiters." (my emphasis -- D.L.)

Trotsky also applied the Marxist analysis of the national question to developments which were not foreseen by Lenin. He saw the revolutionary implications of Ukrainian national consciousness and encouraged revolutionaries in the Ukraine to struggle for separation. This is the first time a national struggle was visualized and projected by the Marxist movement within the Soviet Union after the Russian revolution. He also called for the American Trotskyist movement to take up the demand "self determination of the Negro." He saw that nationalism would play a crucial role in the making of the American revolution. This too was an innovation since it was the first time the Leninist movement recognized the importance of national struggles in the advanced capitalist, imperialist nations. In both instances, the Ukrainians and the Blacks, Trotsky's insights proved to be profoundly prophetic.

After the Russian Revolution, Trotsky was the key inheritor of the Marxist tradition, and the indispensable continuator of its methods and policies. With respect to the national question, he did not fail to transmit its essential features to the future generation. In the process he deepened and broadened the Marxist understanding of it.

### **Where Does The Discussion In Our Movement Stand**

A brief account of the Marxist approach to the national question over the years reveals a number of lessons that must be central to our considerations of the national question, especially the question of Canadian nationalism which is before us in this debate.

Nationalism is complex and contradictory in life, always changing. Concrete and specific investigation of each question is required. Lenin insisted on never taking any formal position before the specific and concrete circumstances were assessed. The attitude of the workers is key. Each nationalist sentiment must be dissected, its separate features analysed. We must take progressive nationalist consciousness forward ("elements which we must know how to seize upon in order to draw the requisite conclusions"). We must oppose and counteract all reactionary aspects of national consciousness. We must assess each circumstance with the interests of proletarian solidarity and proletarian internationalism in mind. We can not however formally counterpose nationalism to internationalism. International solidarity is built on the action of the workers of one nationality defending and promoting the interests of workers of another nationality. Nothing could be more wrong than adopting a schematic, sweeping stance that applies for all aspects of national consciousness for all time.

It is this trap that the document *Canada and the Crisis of World Imperialism* falls into. It is this trap that we intend to avoid in part two of this contribution in our analysis of the rise of Canadian nationalism.

\* (from website W20--Marxist booklist:)

**The Transitional Program for socialist revolution (1938)**, Pathfinder, NY, 1973, 223 pp

**Introductory essays** (1971-72): Trotsky's Transitional Program: its origins and significance for today, by Joseph Hansen (SWP-USA); Transitional and democratic slogans as bridges to socialist revolution, by J. Hansen;

**The role of the Transitional Program in the revolutionary process**, by George Novack (SWP-US); 1938: The death agony of capitalism and the tasks of the Fourth International, by Leon Trotsky; How to fight for a Labor Party in the U.S.; The political backwardness of the American workers; U.S. and European labor movements: a comparison; Completing the Program and putting it to work (...) How economic shifts affect mass moods; Three possibilities with a Labor Party; (*On the slogan*) "For a Workers' and Farmers' Government" (1938); A Transitional Program for Black Liberation (1972); A strategy for revolutionary youth (1969).